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Undermining the West from within: European populists, the US and Russia¹

Angelos-Stylianos Chrysogelos

Abstract Populist parties of the Right and Left are on the rise in Western Europe, but little has been said about their foreign policy positions. This article will try to sketch the basic elements of the positions of some important radical Right and Left populist parties on transatlantic relations, NATO, European security and EU–Russia relations. An examination of these positions reveals that European populist parties of the Right and Left are united by a common aversion to the ongoing modernisation and liberalisation of society and the economy—and that this aversion is reflected in foreign policies that conceptually and practically challenge the notion of the West. The centre-right is urged not to let populists appropriate yet another issue. Instead, it needs to challenge them (and particularly the populist Left) by consistently defending the merits of the Western community of values.

Keywords Populism – Front National – FPÖ – Die Linke – SP – Austria – the Netherlands – Foreign policy – the West – NATO – Russia – US

This article deals with the positions of European populist parties of the Right and Left on the topics of transatlantic cooperation, NATO, European security and Europe–Russia relations. It will thus undertake two tasks that are usually left unattended in current comparative political research. First, both right-wing and left-wing populist parties will be studied. Populism is usually associated with radical Right parties; in turn, the Right is usually associated with challenges to liberal democracy. Here I will show that populism is a common trait of both the far Right and the far Left, and that it is used to update authoritarian ideologies that have been overtaken by the ongoing liberalisation of politics, society and economics in Europe. The similarities between the populist Right and the populist Left will be demonstrated in the field of foreign policy. This is the second analytical contribution of the article. Foreign policy rarely features in analyses of populist parties and their policies. Yet foreign policy is a field that offers itself for emotional and high-profile interventions. Populist parties, so keen on using the media and making headlines with simplistic but impressive policy proposals, cannot afford to ignore foreign policy.

In the first section of the article, I will provide a basic theoretical introduction to the concept of populism and explain the rationale for combining an analysis of the populist Left and the populist Right. I will argue that populist parties in Europe are united not only by a common style, that of populism, but also by the will to use populism to update authoritarian and anti-pluralist projects of the past. In this sense, the reason for looking at both Right and Left populism is the common challenge they pose to

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modern liberal democracy: the promotion of a vision of an undifferentiated, majoritarian and illiberal society.

In the subsequent two sections I will show how this vision finds expression in the foreign policies of the parties towards the US and Russia. The argument here is that these foreign policy positions aim to undermine the dominant ideas of political and economic governance of modern Western democracy. Populist foreign policy positions are thus highly relevant. They allow us to understand the true nature of populism as an opponent to the process of social modernisation and diversification. At the same time, they show how foreign policy becomes a field where contending visions of domestic governance find expression and reflect back onto domestic discourse. Here, populist anti-Americanism and pro-Russianism reflect the populist parties' efforts to update their ideological traditions of authoritarian politics and unitary social and economic policies with reference to modern problems of European security. The populists' preference for a Europe independent of American influence and accomodationist to Russian demands corresponds to this specific model of domestic politics. Whether coming from the Left or the Right, European populism expresses a profound unease with ongoing modernisation, and this unease is shown in the way it tries to undermine the ideological coherence of Western modernity. In the final section of the article I will formulate some policy proposals about how best to deal with the challenge of populist foreign policy.

European populism: no longer yesterday's news

European populism has been described as a thin-centred ideology.² It provides a few ideological guidelines, but it is not a complete system of thought. Populism offers some beliefs, but these beliefs can be adapted to many political messages and serve different political goals. Populism then is something more than a political style: it is not just a manner of saying (or promising) things, it is a sum of understandings. But it also something less than a political ideology: populism is an empty shell, a frame for political ideas, filled with specific ideological understandings according to the political agent's preferences.

Populism is associated with the following main ideological prescriptions:

a) A Manichaeian struggle between two coherent entities: the 'elites' and the 'people'. Populist parties defend the rights of the people from corrupt, insensitive, alienated elites.

b) The heartland: populist parties define the people in unitary, exclusionary terms. Their 'us' is categorically different from any 'them'. This is evoked in the image of a heartland, an emotionally defined image of a visionary time and/or place where the populist's people lived as sovereign and isolated from foreign influences.

² Information in this section is drawn from March (2009), March and Mudde (2005), Minkenberg (2000), Mudde (2004) and Taggart (2000).

c) The politics of the *Stammtisch* (the pub): populist parties offer easy and compact solutions to complicated problems. Usually this is done through targeting guilty elites or social groups as responsible for pressing problems.

d) Political entrepreneurship: the positions and strategies of populist parties are best understood as the movements of non-principled, opportunist politicians who are capable of effectively controlling whole parties or movements. Intra-party politics and other such analyses yield little in trying to understand the positions of skilful tacticians.

What is problematic here is that these prescriptions are not enough for comparative purposes. Populism has become a fixture of mainstream democratic politics, mainly due to the power of electronic media and their focus on individuals and personalities. If I am to justify the common inclusion of populist Right and populist Left parties in this article, something more than their populist rhetoric will need to do the job. In other words, I have to show not only that they share the same shell, but also that they fill it with similar things.

What radical right-wing and new left-wing populist parties have in common is their effort to update authoritarian, illiberal and anti-pluralist ideologies of the past that have been overcome by the ongoing process of economic and social modernisation and diversification. The populisms of the Right and Left represent efforts to update failed projects for the management of the modern economy and society. They are responses to events of profound crisis for the respective ideologies they try to keep alive. The emergence of the radical Right from the late 1960s onwards is part and parcel of the effort to update the failed premodern and modern ideals that seemed irrevocably buried under the ruins of the Second World War: nationalism, religious traditionalism, racism and corporatism. By using the populist inventory mentioned above, the political entrepreneurs of the radical Right keep alive these values within the new political environment. The targeting of the spirit of '68 and, later, of immigration and globalisation allows them to take positions on the issues of the day, and indirectly to keep challenging liberal and postmodern politics. Similarly, the recent rise of the populist Left has been a response to almost 20 years of disarray in the Communist Left since the fall of Communism. New populist Left parties target neoliberal elites and raise the issue of an undifferentiated and sovereign people in order to update their image. Just like radical Right parties, successful populist Left parties do not fight the battles of the past. Instead, they use their keen political instinct to embrace new issues like the environment, global justice and the reform of the global economic and financial architecture.

United in anti-Americanism: European populism and transatlantic relations

European populist parties are united by a disdain for elites and their perceived effort to dilute the sovereign ability of the people to take care of their own business. In the international arena, populism sees the US as a natural target. For the radical Right the US is perceived as an omnipresent superpower that threatens national sovereignty. The rise of the radical Right was especially pronounced in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, and it reflected an unease not only with modernisation and economic globalisation, but also the perception that the nation state was losing much of its power of control and

regulation. In this context, radical Right parties maintain an essentially premodern collectivist, ethnic understanding of the national community by sticking to the classical understanding of the nation state as the building block of the international system. US influence is associated both with power politics that threaten to weaken specific nation states, but also with the promotion of a globalising culture that dilutes this communitarianism. In either case, anti-US feelings are used to placate the radical Right's preferred understanding of the nation state as an ethnically defined, homogeneous community.

For the populist Left, anti-US populism allows it to aim its critique at the structure of the global economic system and the pace of globalisation that is apparently leading to radical deregulation and the weakening of the nation state vis-à-vis financial and transnational economic actors. Left-wing populists defend the nation state because inside it social and welfare legislation is better implemented. In this sense, they also see the US as a force that undermines the nationally defined community, but, unlike the radical Right, they see this community not in ethnic but economic terms. US-led globalisation is seen as promoting the subjugation of the working people (understood in broader class terms). Thus the populist Left's anti-Americanism is an updated version of the traditional Communist opposition to the US, since it allows the populist Left to position itself on important current topics. Just like the radical Right, the new populist Left is nation-centric and manages to bring back into the political struggle the main elements of a failed political project, namely Communism and radical socialism. A crucial difference, however, is that this leftist populism is complemented by a powerful internationalist element, reflecting its ideological descent from transnational socialism. Whereas the populist Left's anti-Americanism corresponds to a welfare nationalism at home, it also is expressed in a radical espousal of various anti-globalisation causes (for example, global justice or the environment) and the promotion of an anti-imperialist rhetoric (as seen in their proposals for a reform of global institutions). Nevertheless, even this internationalism does not escape the pattern we have identified here. Global justice and North-vs-South rhetoric is a fresher version of the Communist Left's traditional espousal of Third World nationalism.

This is the general pattern of anti-Americanism among populist parties. But this anti-Americanism has tangible consequences for European politics. Anti-American populism updates certain national ideological traditions that have always nurtured a specific vision of European institutions, security and relations with the US. In this way, foreign and domestic policies become connected in a coherent radical vision that rejects the modernisation of the economy, the liberalisation of society and the erosion of the nation state. Yet this populism is decisively shaped by the national context and the ideological baggage of each party. Two of the most successful radical Right parties of the past 20 years, the French Front National (FN) and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), are also two of the standard-bearers of this conservative anti-Americanism. Just as was the case with their domestic policies, their populism, expressed in an unequivocal anti-Americanism, allowed the re-emergence of their ideological traditions and their prescriptions for the future of European security.

The FN represents the defeated Right of 200 years of political struggle in France. It is the heir to monarchist, fanatical Catholic, ultra-nationalist and Vichyist political traditions. These ideological currents have always maintained a hostility towards the US, expressed in prescriptions of an independent French foreign policy geared towards grandeur and a pessimistic cultural critique. Today the FN maintains this nationalistic discourse by promoting the idea of an emancipated and strategically

independent Europe that will contribute to the creation of a multipolar world. It calls for France's exit from NATO and distrusts the latter's meddling in European politics. In many ways this is akin to a primitive Gaullism, a fossilised nationalist foreign policy that does not take into account the institutional realities of the EU and NATO. At the same time, the FN castigates globalisation as an American economic and cultural project that threatens sovereignty and national uniformity (Front National 2009).

Sometimes it is not only the ideological baggage but also the political instinct of entrepreneurial tacticians which determines the content of radical populism. In the case of the FPÖ, it was Jörg Haider's exit from the party which allowed it to embrace anti-Americanism wholeheartedly. Jörg Haider's rise to prominence in Austrian politics was also characterised by his promotion of closer ties between a neutral Austria and NATO. Unlike the FN, in the case of the FPÖ pro-NATO rhetoric was a strong signal by Haider that he was willing to reform all aspects of the failed Proporz system of the two main parties. After the FPÖ's entry into government in 2000, discussion about Austria's possible entry into NATO intensified. But Haider made an abrupt about-face when he decided to support Saddam Hussein during the Iraq crisis and to stand up to US security policies. Haider saw international politics as a way to escape his domestic isolation in the post of governor of Carinthia. This change in turn contributed to his breaking with the mainstream of his party, which felt uncomfortable flirting with Arab dictators. His exit allowed the emergence of a more principled ideology, which nevertheless builds on Haider's turn towards the pro-German nationalist wing of Austrian national liberalism (ADL 2002; Perault 2000; Pfefferkorn 1997). These ideological currents share an aversion both to the pervasive nature of globalisation and to US influence on sovereign nations. The FPÖ is a strong supporter of Austrian neutrality and represents hard-line Euroscepticism. The Gaullist legacy is represented in Austria by Haider's FPÖ offshoot, the BZÖ (Alliance for the Future of Austria), which couples anti-US feelings with a call for an intergovernmental but strategically capable Europe on the global scene (see BZÖ 2010, 31, 36).

The populist Left's socialism and Communism feed its ardent anti-Americanism. But anti-Americanism allows new populist Left parties, like the German Die Linke and the Dutch Socialist Party (SP), to position themselves on pressing issues of international politics and thus modernise their rigid and failed legacy. Whereas the radical Right parties are driven by their concern to keep national communities sovereign, independent and undiluted, Die Linke and the SP espouse a radical internationalism, accepting the need for cooperation on the European and the international level, but completely rejecting existing institutional arrangements. Both see NATO as an aggressive military alliance, the military arm of American-led neoliberal globalisation. Die Linke call directly for its dissolution and replacement by a pan-European security organisation, whereas the SP is very reluctant to accept any strategic redefinition of NATO's role. Both parties opposed the continuation of their countries' deployment in Afghanistan, in the case of the SP actually contributing to the fall of the Balkenende government in early 2010. The EU is called upon to dissociate itself from NATO and become a 'civil power', while international security should be provided by collective institutions like the UN (Schultz 2009; SP 2010b).

The populist Left's comparative advantage in relation to the radical Right is its inherited internationalism, which allows it to seek organisational vigour and ideological renewal through affiliation with transnational movements and global causes. In this way the old anti-Americanism of the

Communist and radical Left become renewed through an emphasis on the reform of international institutions and a condemnation of structural imbalances, poverty, war and exploitation. The US is identified the most with these imbalances of globalisation. In this way, the populist Left's radical internationalism also reinforces protectionist and nationalist feelings at home: the Left is internationalist, but only on its own terms. Since the world it wants is basically non-existent, it falls back on an essentialist defence of the nation state as the building block which allows the 'people' to remain sovereign and independent from transnational elites (Die Linke 2009).

Summing up this section, we can say that European populism reflects not only an unease with the ongoing modernisation of European societies but also a challenge to the main international institutions that are thought to reinforce this modernisation. In the populist Right's anti-Americanism we see the effort of nationalist and reactionary forces to revitalise their dream of ethnically unitary societies and independent foreign policies. In the populist Left's radical internationalism we see the effort of delegitimised Communists and Socialists to revitalise their dream of regulated and insulated economies in the West and a radical overhaul of the economic system globally. Yet the radical Right's and radical Left's espousal of populism, in updating and embedding their outdated domestic visions, also has real-life consequences. In mounting a challenge to liberal and pluralist politics, they also infuse into public discourse an uncertainty about the collective values and ideas of governance that unite the West, as reflected in the transatlantic community and institutions of global governance. In other words, as the West is advancing towards postmodern social structures, populists raise dissent against the idea of the West itself. This is clear in the way they treat parts of the 'rest' as well. In the next section I will deal with Russia.

In the shadow of the bear: European populism, Europe and Russia

Populists produce and disseminate images of Russia in congruence with their ideological baggage. But just as with the US, their policies on Russia serve to embed a specific vision of domestic politics in a modern discourse that deals with pressing international issues. With Russia we see again the same pattern: populist parties engaging pressing issues of foreign policy by formulating concrete proposals, but with an eye at updating their ideological traditions and creating a link between foreign and domestic policies. Populism allows radical Right and radical Left positions on Russia to gain new credence. Again, the consequences for European security and integration are not negligible.

Populist parties of the Right and Left seem united by a common positive approach towards Russia. They see Russia as an important ally of Europe and a partner that will allow Europe to balance the US in international affairs. In other words, they reject the idea of the 'West' in favour of a multipolar world. Most importantly, populist parties promote a discourse of realpolitik and material interests in international politics, which contradicts the values and ideas behind European integration. Populist parties see Russia as a source of energy and military clout as well as an attractive partner with similar cultural traits as Europe has. It is obvious that populist parties completely discard issues of human rights and democracy in their relations with Russia. By omitting these issues that can be seen as questions of

transnational interest, populists reinforce their vision of sovereign nation states furthering their interests without reference to universal values or prior institutional commitments. In this effort to approach Russia, populists use a Europeanist discourse, understanding relations with Russia through a European lens. But this is not inconsistent with their Euroscepticism: by seeing the world in *realpolitik*, materialist terms, populist parties conveniently overlook the EU's comparative advantage, which is its normative power and ability to shape its surroundings through the strength of its values. Populists are obviously in the business of transforming not the surroundings but Europe itself.

Radical Right parties that are influenced by authoritarian and nationalist traditions of the pre–Second World War era are very comfortable with Russia, much more so than new Right populist parties that are active in countries with a much thinner authoritarian tradition. These parties have a cultural understanding of postmodern society which leads them to be West centred. Examples of these include the populist Right parties of the Netherlands and Denmark. But the populism of such parties as the Front National and the FPÖ is much more influenced by nation-centric, premodern and reactionary political ideologies. These ideologies inform these parties' unequivocal pro-Russian positions. The Front National represents a crude Gaullist vision of a *Europe des patries*, united by its common aversion to American political and cultural influence. It is congruent with its nationalist heritage. The party also sees Russia as a cultural complement to Europe. Europe should not look to Turkey for strategic leverage and foreign policy dynamism, but to Russia (Le Pen 2009). The FPÖ shows the same pattern. The party is a continuation of German nationalist and national liberal traditions, which have always had a love–hate relationship with Russia. Russia has always been seen as both a threat and an opportunity by German nationalists. For the FPÖ, the Russia of today is an appealing partner because it counters US influence, strengthens Europe in the energy sector, balances against Austrian nationalism's traditional 'others' who are today part of NATO (e.g., Czech Republic) and embeds a culture of value-free politics in Europe (FPÖ 2009). The pro-Russian positions of these two parties have been evident not only in programmatic statements and declarations but also in concrete political choices: the FN voted in favour of the EU–Russia modernisation agreement in the European Parliament, while the FPÖ supported Russian claims during the war with Georgia in 2008 (Ecker 2008; Le Pen 2010). The mantra was that the EU had to be honest with Russia and not set exaggerated standards of good behaviour.

For the populist Left, pro-Russian positions seem more natural, given the Left's old affinity with the Soviet Union. Of course Russia today is very different than the Soviet Union. But this just goes to show that left-wing populists are still devoted to a vision of sovereign states and that their ideas of security cooperation in Europe are still profoundly at odds with the reality of transatlantic cooperation. A typical example here is Die Linke. Even though it claims an affiliation with the Russian Communist Party, it still accepts the current power constellation in Russia as a fact of life (Gehrke 2007). For the Left, courting Russia complements its ideas on NATO and the international system: whereas NATO is seen as the choice for war, Russia is seen as a choice for peace. The EU is urged to develop closer contacts with as few conditionality criteria as possible. Together, the EU and Russia can counter the belligerent activities of America in Europe and establish lasting peace in a unified continent. In sum, the populist Left's discourse is very reminiscent of Cold War–era Communist and radical socialist propositions. Die Linke and the SP call for a pan-European security framework, based on the OSCE. They are willing to trade NATO security guarantees for a self-managed pan-European collective security

system. Both parties have shown their proclivity towards pro-Russian positions. They speak out against 'provocations' of Russia, and they support Russian claims with respect to Georgia and energy disputes (SP 2010a; Brix 2008). During the Russia–Georgia war of summer 2008, both Die Linke and the SP mobilised in favour of Russia in their national parliaments and the European Parliament. The SP was actually perceived as the most pro-Russian party in the generally Atlanticist Netherlands (*NRC Handelsblad* 2008).

Die Linke in particular has the most developed positions on EU–Russia relations, and they read like a throwback to Social Democratic positions of the 1950s. This in itself is not strange, given the party's roots as a coalition between East German Communists and disgruntled West German Social Democrats.³ What is interesting here is the longitudinal pattern that arises: the pro-Russian alliance of the fringes today represents an apparently strange coalition of French nationalists, German-speaking national liberals, Communists and leftists. This coalition more or less corresponds to the same ideological currents that drove Cold War détente in Germany and France between the 1950s and 1980s. The populist parties of today see in Russia a useful proxy for their effort to promote a domestic vision of majoritarian and illiberal social orders. Russia as a foreign policy issue is a very handy marker to differentiate populists from the alliance of Russia-sceptic mainstream parties, including the centre-right, Social Democrats, Liberals and Greens. This is particularly true for issues of practical importance such as energy. But as was the case with the US, in their efforts they create very tangible challenges to foreign policy orthodoxy in Europe. In essence, they update the simplistic vision of détente which was overcome by the end of the Cold War. This instrumentalisation of détente today for the purpose of challenging the domestic liberal order of Europe provides an interesting insight into the nature of the pro-détente coalition during the Cold War. But as was shown back then, such instrumentalisation can be very successful in infusing new values into public debate over foreign policy. In other words, apart from their authoritarian and unitarian nature, by virtue of their simplistic and engaged view of the world, populist parties pose a very practical challenge to the practice of European foreign policy.

The mainstream response: it starts with foreign policy

European populists use foreign policy to promote their ideological agendas. They shape foreign policy issues to match their populist understandings about the role of elites and the subjugation of the people. Radical Right populists promote anti-Americanism because they see the US as a political and cultural threat and an agent of transnational globalisation. Populist leftists criticise the US for driving a kind of globalisation that erodes the ability of the nation state to act as a welfare state. Both groups see international politics through the lens of the nation state and are opposed to changes to its nature. This is reflected in the way they see Russia. Europe is urged to see Russia as a partner in power politics, a potential ally in the effort to reshape the globalised world according to the populists' opposition to ongoing modernisation, diversification and pluralisation. In sum, foreign policy becomes a very effective marker issue of the populist mindset.

³ See reference to the Helsinki final act in Die Linke (2009).

Mainstream parties, and especially the centre-right, should deal with this threat in a substantial and coherent way. There are two reasons for this. First, the continuing growth in the power of populist parties of the Right and Left is bound to have a tangible effect on foreign policies. If they had their way, populist parties would dissolve NATO, antagonise the US, throw Europe into the arms of Russia and seek to remodel the international economic system without reference to the values of the West. European populist parties are, then, a clear 'enemy within' in the West. Second, the centre-right needs to respond to the effort to instrumentalise foreign policy, because it keeps alive ideological traditions that in the past have troubled Europe and, indeed, represent the perfect antithesis of the current process of European integration.

Since the 1950s the centre-right has been the main agent of a process of European integration that relies on the complementarity of European unification and NATO, on the maintenance of a transatlantic community of values and on the creation of a foreign policy identity for Europe that relies on its soft and normative power. The foreign policy positions of populist parties threaten to undermine the conceptual foundations of and the political support for this project. This could have profound consequences for the electoral fortunes and the ideological standing of the centre-right family. The challenge from the Right feels more urgent. Radical Right parties, through their promotion of nationalism and *realpolitik*, raise the spectre of the resurgence of far Right ideologies which the centre-right tried so hard to expel from mainstream discourse after the war. Quite understandably, to many this challenge feels the more tangible. Yet I believe that the populist Left is building up a more profound challenge. Unlike the radical Right, the populist Left is not updating premodern and reactionary ideologies, but modernist and presumably forward-looking ones. Also, unlike the radical Right, the populist Left's success may be more contagious to its mainstream cousins, the Social Democratic centre-left. In other words, its conceptual outlook could prove more lasting in public discourse. Finally, the populist Left's organisational affiliation with transnational movements makes it both more flexible and less menacing to the eyes of the apolitical median voter. One could draw a parallel with the hasty years of Cold War *détente* politics, when the mainstream Left was much more successful at driving its vision of *détente* in alliance with rising new Left movements, in comparison with the conservative and Carolingian French and West German Gaullist vision.

The centre-right needs to stand up to the rise of populist Left mindset in general. But foreign policy is a good place to start. The centre-right needs to invest more time in portraying the transatlantic security structure, the values-based EU foreign policy and the competent management of foreign policy emergencies as a foundation and a needed complement of a diversified and pluralist society. To the populism of anti-Americanism and Russian oil, the centre-right needs to respond with an engaged discourse of responsibility, values and rights. Foreign policy disputes are rare, but if they exist, they tend to become foundational, identity disputes. In light of the advances populist parties have made by appropriating domestic themes of immigration or the economy, the centre-right can regain the political initiative by pointing to the success story of European integration and Western values-based cooperation.

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